

Traveller

Plan to stop deadly bug at airports

Heath Aston
2-3 minutes

INTERNATIONAL air passengers would be forced to drink a sachet of probiotic formula before landing in Australia under a proposal by one of the state's leading gastroenterologists aimed at preventing an outbreak of a deadly bug ravaging North America.

Thomas Borody, the founder of Sydney's Centre for Digestive Diseases, has likened his radical idea to the way in which incoming aircraft were once sprayed for foreign insects.

Professor Borody believes NSW will not be able to avoid an epidemic of the stomach bug *Clostridium difficile*, the symptoms of which include severe diarrhoea, without concerted action.

A hyper-virulent strain of *C. difficile* has killed 35 people in Ontario, Canada, in just the past four months. In the US, the superbug is estimated to have cost health services \$3.2 billion in 12 months.

"We're not ready for it in this country ... we're staring at an epidemic," Professor Borody told the *Sun-Herald*. He is working with a pharmaceutical company on a product that would return "normal flora" to the stomachs of air passengers, preventing further importation of the deadly *C. difficile* strain, known as "027". He will present it to authorities within two months.

The Medical Journal of Australia reported the deadly strain first entered Australia in 2009, carried by a US tourist visiting Western Australia.

It has been identified at Mona Vale, Manly, Ryde, Royal North Shore and Greenwich hospitals. *C. difficile* produces large spores that can survive on walls, curtains and other surfaces.

Professor Borody believes two people in NSW have died from the effects of *C. difficile* this year.

In state Parliament, the Health Minister, Jillian Skinner, said 230 cases of *C. difficile* had been dealt with in hospitals in the first quarter of this year but she did not say how many were of the deadly variety.

A spokeswoman for the NSW Health Department said there had not been any reported increase in cases since a cluster in a hospital in Victoria. "Mandatory reporting of *C. difficile* infections has been in place since October 2010," she said.